

Did Jesus Return Invisibly in 1914?

An Investigation of the claims made in the *Watchtower* publication, *What does the Bible Really Teach?*

By Mike Felker

Mike@theapologeticfront.com

www.theapologeticfront.com

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Any corrections to be made or relevant arguments to consider, please contact me through the email above.

To say that the 1914 doctrine is important to Jehovah's Witnesses is an understatement. To stress how important this doctrine is to them, it would suffice to use the Watchtower Society's own words:

*** w86 4/1 p. 31 Questions From Readers ***

Approved association with Jehovah's Witnesses requires accepting the entire range of the true teachings of the Bible, including those Scriptural beliefs that are unique to Jehovah's Witnesses. What do such beliefs include?...That 1914 marked the end of the Gentile Times and the establishment of the Kingdom of God in the heavens, as well as the time for Christ's foretold presence. (Luke 21:7-24; Revelation 11:15-12:10)

*** w83 1/1 p. 12 par. 5 The Kingdom Issue to the Fore! ***

Properly, then, the ending of the Gentile Times in the latter half of 1914 still stands on a historical basis as one of the fundamental Kingdom truths to which we must hold today.

*** w85 9/1 p. 25 par. 15 God's Ministers Prove Their Qualification ***

So Christendom's clergy refuse to take a stand for Jehovah's Kingdom by Jesus Christ. For failing to support it, they will be destroyed in the "great tribulation" just ahead. But unlike them, Jehovah's Witnesses have abandoned Babylon the Great, the world empire of false religion, and are preaching the Kingdom message in 203 lands. This unparalleled work is an outstanding feature of "the sign" proving that in 1914 Jesus was installed as heavenly King, to rule amid his enemies.—Matthew 24:3, 14, 21; Psalm 110:1, 2; Revelation 18:1-5.

In light of these quotes, it is no stretch to say that according to the *Watchtower*, your very salvation depends on the acceptance of 1914 in addition to their "entire range" of teachings. Because of such statements, would we not expect the doctrine of 1914 to be based on the most solid biblical reasons? More importantly, would we expect our salvation to be based on something that is doubtful or speculative?

Therefore, 1914 should be investigated to consider whether it is based on the best possible reasons. All Jehovah's Witnesses reading this are encouraged to do their own homework as a Berean and "examine the Scriptures to see whether these things are so." (Acts 17:11) That is, don't take anyone's word for it. Do your own research and come to your own conclusions.

With that said, the *Watchtower* publication, *What does the Bible Really Teach* will be considered in this investigation. Though more detailed explanations are given elsewhere¹, most Jehovah's Witnesses would probably agree that this publication contains one of the best and most concise explanations of the doctrine.

Beginning on page 215 in *What does the Bible Really Teach*:

"DECADES in advance, Bible students proclaimed that there would be significant developments in 1914. What were these and what evidence points to 1914 as such an important year?"

There are a few things to note about this statement. First, it is misleading. It is quite an understatement to suggest that the early proclamations of 1914 were of "significant developments." Though it is true that 1914 brought about World War I, this was not

¹ See the *Watchtower* publication *Insight on the Scriptures* p. 447-467

something that was foretold by Russell or the “Bible Students.”² Instead, the facts clearly reveal that the “Bible Students” were predicting something much more significant: the “Battle of Armageddon” and the end of the world. Unfortunate as it was, they credited the teaching that we now know to be *false* to God Himself:

“There is no reason for changing the figures; they are God’s dates, not ours; 1914 is not the date for the beginning, but the end!”

-*The Watch Tower*, July 15, 1894, p. 1677

Second, in addition to understating the facts pertaining to the early proclamations of 1914, the *What does the Bible Really Teach* book seems to give the impression that the Bible Students were doing something commendable in their proclamation³. The question one should ask is, is it commendable for the “Bible Students” to be proclaiming a *false doctrine* and attributing it to God?

Last, given that the Society has had a poor track record of falsely pointing to dates that were supposed to have specific fulfillments⁴ (1874, 1878, 1881, 1914, 1918, 1925, 1935, 1975), is it not at least questionable that the Society teaches that one must accept what they are *now* teaching about 1914 to be a true Christian?⁵

“As recorded at Luke 21:24, Jesus said: ‘Jerusalem will be trampled on by the nations, until the appointed times of the nations [“the times of the Gentiles,” King James Version] are fulfilled.’ Jerusalem had been the capital city of the Jewish nation—the seat of rulership of the line of kings from the house of King David. (Psalm 48:1, 2) However, these kings were unique among national leaders. They sat on ‘Jehovah’s throne’ as representatives of God himself. (1 Chronicles 29:23) Jerusalem was thus a symbol of Jehovah’s rulership.

How and when, though, did God’s rulership begin to be ‘trampled on by the nations’? This happened in 607 B.C.E. when Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians. ‘Jehovah’s throne’ became vacant, and the line of kings who descended from David was interrupted. (2 Kings 25:1-26)

The first obstacle to deal with is the 607 date. This is one very important link in the 1914 chronology to which, if proven false, would render 1914 as false. In light of the *Watchtower’s* declaration that one’s status as a true Christian depends on 1914, should it be expected to find a link in the chain that is made out of very thin rope instead of steel? The truth is, the 607 date is at worse, completely false; and at best, questionable. It is not

² Actually, the “Bible Students” at that time had been proclaiming a *different* date for Christ’s “invisible presence”:

*** jv chap. 10 pp. 133-134 Growing in Accurate Knowledge of the Truth ***

In 1876, when Russell had first read a copy of Herald of the Morning, he had learned that there was another group who then believed that Christ’s return would be invisible and who associated that return with blessings for all families of the earth. From Mr. Barbour, editor of that publication, Russell also came to be persuaded that Christ’s invisible presence had begun in 1874. Attention was later drawn to this by the subtitle “Herald of Christ’s Presence,” which appeared on the cover of Zion’s Watch Tower.

³ In fact, this is exactly what they have said of themselves elsewhere:

*** w84 12/1 p. 18 par. 13 Keep Ready! ***

It is easy for the established churches of Christendom and other people to criticize Jehovah’s Witnesses because their publications have, at times, stated that certain things could take place on certain dates. But is not such line of action in harmony with Christ’s injunction to “keep on the watch”? (Mark 13:37)

⁴ Even as late as 1994, every *Awake!* Magazine proclaimed, “this magazine builds confidence in the Creator’s promise of a peaceful and secure new world before the generation that saw the events of 1914 passes away.”

⁵ The reality is, if a Jehovah’s Witness changes his view on a particular doctrine, it is regarded as apostasy. On the contrary, if the *Governing Body* changes their view, it is “new light.”

the intention of this article to go into all the details surrounding this date. But it must be emphasized that all historians, both biblical and secular, date the destruction of Jerusalem at 586/587 B.C.E. as opposed to 607⁶. Much has been written and debated from both sides of the issue, which is too complex for the purposes here.⁷ It is encouraged that everyone do their own research from both sides of the issue and come to your own conclusions.

But leaving aside the date, there are other questionable issues at hand; namely, the “trampling of the nations” that is spoken of by Jesus. The publication states that this “trampling” occurred in 607. But notice the time-tense that Jesus places on the statement: “Jerusalem *will be* trampled.” That is, Jesus is speaking in the future tense. How could Jesus be speaking of something in the future that, according to the publication, happened hundreds of years before he came to earth?⁸ The publication does not tell us. In addition, there are other clues in the context of Jesus’ statement that gives us even more reason to believe that He is speaking of something future:

“Woe to the pregnant women and the ones suckling a baby in those days! For there will be a great necessity upon the land and wrath on this people; and they will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the nations, until the appointed times of the nations are fulfilled.”

-Luke 21:23-24, *New World Translation*

Given all the future-tense phrases that are found in this passage, is there any good reason to view the “trampling” as the exception in referring to the past event? In light of this, have any solid evidence been observed thus far in the publication’s article? Or have the arguments been shown to be questionable, if not false? What would the Scriptures teach about such things?

“Make sure of all things; hold fast to what is fine.”

-1 Thessalonians 5:21, *New World Translation*

In other words, should not all students of the Bible examine the *Watchtower*’s claims and “make sure” it aligns with Scripture?⁹ And if it doesn’t, or the reasons given are found to

⁶ I have yet to find an exception to this amongst professional historians.

⁷ One is encouraged to read Carl Olof Jonsson’s exhaustive investigation of this date in his book, *The Gentile Times Reconsidered*.

⁸ To be fair, the *Watchtower* are not the only ones who hold to this in reference a past event:

“The times of the Gentiles’ domination over Jerusalem actually began when the Babylonians took the city and the nation into Captivity in 586 B.C. Jerusalem will again fall under Gentile domination in the Tribulation (Zech. 14:1-2) just before the Messiah returns to restore Jerusalem. It is that restoration of which Jesus spoke next (Luke 21:25-28).

-John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Accordance electronic ed. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983)

⁹ According to the *Watchtower*, one deciding this independently isn’t an option:

*** w83 1/15 p. 27 pars. 19-20 Armed for the Fight Against Wicked Spirits ***

...there are some who point out that the organization has had to make adjustments before, and so they argue: “This shows that we have to make up our own mind on what to believe.” This is independent thinking. Why is it so dangerous?

Such thinking is an evidence of pride...If we get to thinking that we know better than the organization, we should ask ourselves: “Where did we learn Bible truth in the first place? Would we know the way of the truth if it had not been for guidance from the organization? Really, can we get along without the direction of God’s organization?” No, we cannot!

be questionable, should one not be more hesitant to join with an organization who claims everyone's salvation to be dependent on this doctrine?

"Would this 'trampling' go on forever? No, for the prophecy of Ezekiel said regarding Jerusalem's last king, Zedekiah: 'Remove the turban, and life off the crown...It will certainly become no one's until he comes who has the legal right, and I must give it to him.' (Ezekiel 21:26, 27) The one who has 'the legal right' to the Davidic crown is Christ Jesus (Luke 1:32, 33) So the 'trampling' would end when Jesus became King."

Though no explicit statement in Scripture says such, the *Watchtower* insists that Jesus "became King" in 1914. The problem is, the Scriptures indicate that Jesus became King in the first century.

"All authority has been given me in heaven and on the earth."
-Matthew 28:18, *New World Translation*

"He has operated in the case of the Christ when he raised him up from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above every government and authority and power and lordship and every name named, not only in this system of things, but also in that to come."
-Ephesians 1:20-21, *New World Translation*

How could Christ be further exalted or any more "King" when it is clear that He has been given "all authority" and seated at the right hand of God Almighty in the first century?

"When would that grand event occur? Jesus showed that the Gentiles would rule for a fixed period of time. The account in Daniel chapter 4 holds the key to knowing how long that period would last. It relates a prophetic dream experienced by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He saw an immense tree that was chopped down. Its stump could not grow because it was banded with iron and copper. An angel declared: 'Let seven times pass over it.' -Daniel 4:10-16"

Immediately, an assumption is observed on the *Watchtower's* part that is made without warrant. That is, they connect the "gentile times" spoken of in Luke 21:24 to the "seven times" of Daniel 4:10, 16. As spoken of earlier, it would seem that for such a dogmatic doctrine, one would expect more solid evidence and less unsubstantiated assumptions.

"In the Bible, trees are sometimes used to represent rulership. (Ezekiel 17:22-24; 31:2-5) So the chopping down of the symbolic tree represents how God's rulership, as expressed through the kings at Jerusalem, would be interrupted."

Though it is true that trees are *sometimes* used (as the *Watchtower* admits) to represent rulership, is the *Watchtower* justified in applying this to the tree in Nebuchadnezzar's dream? When one observes that the text itself identifies the tree as something else, this creates a very difficult problem for the *Watchtower's* interpretation; namely, that they are insisting on an interpretation contrary to what is stated in the text:

"This was the dream that I myself, King Neb-u-chad-nez'are, beheld; and you yourself, O Bel-te-shaz'zar [or, Daniel], say what the interpretation is...the tree that you beheld...it is you, O king, because you have grown great and become strong..."
Daniel 4:18, 20, 22, *New World Translation*

If the meaning of the tree is provided by Daniel, why would one look beyond the interpretation given? In addition, if there is another interpretation or application, where would anyone look to verify this? Are there other Scriptures which provide additional

insights? Is there anything in the Bible that would provide some sort of basis by which one could apply some sort of dual-fulfillment to the dream beyond what is given in Daniel? If so, then why doesn't the Watchtower explain this?

Even if we consider the possibility that the "tree" represents "how God's rulership, as expressed through the kings at Jerusalem would be interrupted," the *text itself* seems to give a contrary perspective:

"This is the interpretation, O king, and the decree of the Most High is that which must befall my lord the king. And you they will be driving away from men, and with the beasts of the field your dwelling will come to be, and the vegetation is what they will give even to you to eat just like the bulls; and with the dew of the heavens you yourself will be getting wet, and seven times themselves will pass over you, until you know that the Most High is Ruler in the kingdom of mankind, and that to the one whom he wants to he gives it."

-Daniel 4:24-25, *New World Translation*

If the interpretation is what the *Watchtower* says, then it is contradictory to the interpretation given by *Daniel himself* under inspiration. That is, Daniel informs the king that the "cutting down of the tree" represents how he will be driven away from human society to act like a beast in the wild. And once again, for a doctrine that is mandatory for all Christians to believe, would one not expect a more solid biblical basis than what the *Watchtower* has offered?

"Revelation 12:6, 14 indicates that three and a half times equal 'a thousand two hundred and sixty days.' Seven times' would therefore last twice as long, or 2,520 days after Jerusalem's fall."

Like the connections made between Luke 21:24 and Daniel 4, they do not provide a basis for which one should connect Revelation 12:6, 14 to the "seven times" of Daniel 4. But even if such a connection is assumed, the *Watchtower* still has to make the case that the "cutting of the tree" represents "God's rulership" when, in fact, the text expresses something different.

Even if this leaves open the question of what the "seven times" means in Daniel 4, one is limited with what the text says; for Daniel 4:28 states that, "All this happened to Nebuchadnezzar the king." In addition, verse 33 articulates, "The word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled." Therefore, whatever the "seven times" are, the interpretation explains that they were fulfilled in Nebuchadnezzar.

"Evidently, then, this prophecy covers a much longer period of time. On the basis of Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6, which speak of a 'day for a year,' the 'seven times' would cover 2,520 years."

This is yet another place where connections are made without a basis. Though interpretive formulas are helpful in explaining some texts, one is not warranted in creating connections where the Scriptures are silent. That is, what basis does the *Watchtower* have in connecting the "formulas" in Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6 to the "seven times" of Daniel 4? If none are given, should the *Watchtower* be this dogmatic about the doctrine?

Furthermore, is it warranted to apply the 2,520 years to the "seven times," when Daniel 4 specifically expresses that this time period was fulfilled in Nebuchadnezzar? Was the

king *really* dethroned for that long? As for Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6, is there *anything* in these texts which provides a basis for making “interpretive formulas” and imposing them on other texts? If so, where would one draw the line? Should the “a day for a year” formula be applied to any place where the word “day” occurs? If not, then on what Scriptural basis does the Watchtower have for making this connection with Daniel 4?

“The 2,520 years began in October 607 B.C.E., when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the Davidic king was taken off his throne. The period ended in October 1914. At that time, the ‘appointed times of the nations’ ended, and Jesus Christ was installed as God’s heavenly king. —Psalm 2:1-6; Daniel 7:13, 14”

Since a) 2,520 years as well as the 607 date have been shown to be speculative at best, b) the connections between Luke 21:24 and Daniel 4 are made without basis and c) Scripture supports the idea of Christ’s enthronement occurring at the ascension in the first century, then this paragraph made by the *Watchtower* has no merit.

“Just as Jesus predicted, his ‘presence’ as heavenly King has been marked by dramatic world developments—war, famine, earthquakes, pestilences. (Matthew 24:3-8; Luke 21:11) Such developments bear powerful testimony to the fact that 1914 indeed marked the birth of God’s heavenly Kingdom and the beginning of ‘the last days’ of this present wicked system of things. —2 Timothy 3:1-5.”

It is interesting to note that many Bible students that are not Jehovah’s Witnesses hold that they are living in “the last days” without having any knowledge of the 1914 doctrine¹⁰. There is no disputing the fact that significant events occurred in 1914. But without a Scriptural basis, what warrant is there for believing that Christ was enthroned in 1914? In addition, what Scriptural basis does the Watchtower have in insisting that one cannot be a true Christian unless they hold to this complex doctrine?

In conclusion, any Jehovah’s Witness reading this is encouraged not to take the author’s word for it or the Society’s. Instead, do your own research and come to your own conclusions. If it turns out that the *Watchtower’s* basis for 1914 falls short of its claims of being, “God’s sole channel of communication,” what will this mean for you as a Christian? Will you remain in the organization or will you look for something else? For many Jehovah’s Witnesses, this information will not sway them since they have determined in their minds that there is nowhere else to go; even if the doctrine proves to be incorrect. But for others, they will feel lost and abandoned due to the Society’s strict policies on doctrinal dissent.

However discouraging this may be, a few words of encouragement will be offered. Thousands of Jehovah’s Witnesses have found happiness and contentment after leaving the Watchtower; not because they found *something* else, but *someone* else¹¹. This was the message of the early Christians. When confronted with the gospel, many Jews were probably confused in figuring out where to go when “God’s organization” (i.e. the Jewish community) was shown to be inadequate for their salvation. But the early Christians

¹⁰ Consider the popularity of books like the *Left Behind* series.

¹¹ This is not to say that happiness should override *truth*.

didn't point them to just another organization. Instead, they pointed them to the *person* of Jesus Christ for salvation. In fact, it is the *only* hope of salvation that one can have.

"Most truly I say to YOU, He that hears my word and believes him that sent me has everlasting life, and he does not come into judgment but has passed over from death to life."

-John 5:24, *New World Translation*

Christ's invitation is for all who are willing to place their faith in Him and "the one who sent Him." And until one does this, they cannot be saved, no matter how faithfully one submits to "God's organization."